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Published October 15th, 2008

## Moraga Town Staff: Stressed Out and Struggling

By *Sophie Braccini*



Darlene Colaso takes a minute to sit down in the Town Offices Photo Sophie Braccini

Appearances would indicate that the Town of Moraga has set in place an informal hiring freeze; two staff members who have resigned recently in the Administration and Planning departments have not been replaced nor have the positions been posted on the Town's website. As Interim Town Manager Jay Tashiro and Financial Director Joan Streit work on scenarios to balance the budget, fear of lay-offs looms over the staff, changing the once friendly and cooperative workplace to a hotbed of rumors, including one that several department heads may be looking for less cloudy skies. Tashiro, who stepped in to help after former Town Manager Phil Vince accepted an offer from the City of Martinez, did not respond to requests for comment on the situation.

"This town has always claimed to be set for minimal government," says Public Works Director Jill Mercurio, "however, residents expect a high level of service and the result is overworked personnel who get burned out after a few years."

The first to go was Lilinoe Kekoa, the Administrative Assistant who supported the Town Manager. Then Rhonda Bassore, who served as Town Clerk and Assistant to the Planning Director, left for a position closer to home in Pittsburg. Neither Kekoa nor Bassore has been replaced.

Darlene Colaso, who was Resources & Risk Manager/Assistant to the Town Manager, assumed the Town Clerk's role while keeping her other duties as well, and Assistant Planner Kelly Suronen took over the Planning Department Assistant portion of Bassore's job. An interim, part-time Town Clerk was hired to cover the election period. At the time the article was written, this person was on vacation until the end of October and Colaso was handling those duties.

"Yes, people expect and are receiving services comparable to what is offered by cities with a much higher ratio of staff to residents," confirms Darlene Colaso.

She believes that if the staff is cut back even further, people will notice the difference in the support they will receive: longer delays in for any service requests, and less human interaction to get the information people need.

"Our jobs are challenging," adds Colaso, "we are all wearing multiple hats and

striving to bring a high level of service to the community." Unfortunately, with a projected budget deficit as early as next year, and the absence of new sources of revenue in the short term, the fear of lay-offs may become a reality.

Due to recent changes in personnel, portions of the budget were not brought back to the department heads for review and consideration before being taken to the Council. "The department heads were not included in discussing the fiscal concerns and potential solutions," regrets Mercurio. She remembers previous budget cycles when all of the department heads would discuss all of the issues, and help solve problems together.

"I hope that the new Council will consider adding some type of business tax to improve our revenue stream," proposes Colaso.

Other elements have been worrisome for the staff. Normally, government employees sign an agreement called a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that defines their salaries and benefits. Right now, Moraga's employees do not have such an agreement. They have been granted a Cost of Living Adjustment, but for some, like the police officers who have many vacation days that were never taken and could expire, there is still a need for negotiation and agreement.

Despite the uncertainties, the Town staff does its best to make sure that the Town stays in compliance and its citizens receive services. But if rumors come to fruition and some department heads leave, finding replacements in this difficult budget situation may be challenging for the new Town Manager, who is expected to be hired early next year.

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